The Forbidden Tale

by Alyssa

Once upon a time, there was a king named William, who ruled a large and mighty kingdom. And yet, he was sad, for he was growing old, and had no child to inherit the throne. Then, happily, a son was born. A prince. And he was given the name William, for his father. Kings and Queens came from all around to offer their gifts to the child. Among them was the king of a neighboring kingdom, who brought with him his queen, who was great with their first child.

The two kings got along very well indeed, and King William invited them to stay for the holiday at his palace, declaring that a woman in the queen's condition ought not to travel. What was intended to be a stay of confinement until the queen's child was born turned into a longlasting friendship and correspondence, alternating with the two princes, the young William and that of the foreign royal family, Prince Rothbart, travelling for stays at each other's palace during every holiday they could find an excuse to do so.

Prince William was a kindly boy, forever smiling, running about with the castle guards of either keep and learning swordcraft and the art of war at a young age. Though his own and Prince Rothbart's parents, he learned the art of statecraft, at which he was a natural for his charisma.

Rothbart was much more serious, and held no such interest in warcraft, as his spindly arms and legs and barrel chest made for porportions too odd to befit a soldier. He turned to other methods to entertain himself, which William found just as amusing as his contemporary did when Rothbart excidedly approached him one day during a summer holiday, when William had taken a flagship to Rothbart's kingdom.

"Willy, take a look at this!" he cried, thrusting a book under William's nose in complete ignorance of the broadsword in his friend's hand and flipping the pages gleefully. "Father just found it! It's a spellbook! They've said that I can study it, if I want to! I'm going to be an enchanter, Willy!" William laughed at Rothbart's obvious pleasure, happy for his friend, in much the opposite way of the soldiers he had been training with.

"Maybe you can find a spell that will keep that awful village girl, Zelda, away from me." William mused. "She keeps offering me drinks of water and hanging over the wall every time I ride past her cottage. She's okay-looking, I guess, but she annoys me to no end with the way she looks at me." "Of course, of course!" Rothbart agreed eagerly, though his thoughts were very much elsewhere.

It was that very day that Rothbart cast his first successful spell. The castle guards had laughed racously when Rothbart had begun tracing runes in ash on the trees surrounding a clearing, and had done so even lounder when he stood in the very center of the clearing, chanting in a language which burned his tongue to speak. The guard's laughter ceased at once when the dragon Rothbart had been attempting to summon cast a shadow over the scene as it flew in front of the sun.

It landed in a nearby field and killed eight cows before Rothbart brought it under control, but his parents were so pleased at their son's accomplishment that they compensated the owner of the cattle triple the amount of what the cows would have cost and began sending summons to all the magic-doers within their reach, seeking schooling for the prince. No one laughed at Prince Rothbart after that day.

One of the sorcerer who came brought his son, Claudius. Claudius was every bit as lanky as Rothbart, with a crooked nose which might have been broken once already, and the same talent for the Art. So then there were three boys, instead of two, running about the two kingdoms and causing innocent boyish mayhem wherever they went. They were the happiest boys anywhere. And then she came.

"I don't know about this," Rothbart confided to William and Claudius nearly nine years after the dragon incident. They had all grown into strapping young men from their boyhood, though William was quite more fit than his two companions. "I'm not a very good dancer. Do I really have to go to this ball?" He spoke the last to his parents, who exchanged knowing smiles.

"Dearheart, this ball is to celebrate your birthday." his mother reminded gently. "I'm afraid there's not much of an option. We can't very well cut the cake unless you're there, can we? Besides, King Arthur and Queen Guinivere have come all the way from the court at Camelot just so that their daughters could attend. Guinivere II, Portia, and Janet were most insistant, I hear."

"How bad can it be, Rothbart?" William elbowed him playfully in the ribs, arching his eyebrows insinuatively. "I've heard those Camelot girls are real lookers." "And there'll be one for each of us," Claudius added, the tip of his pointed hat aquiver with anticipation. "Since you're the birthday boy, we'll let you pick which one you want, but you have to swear that you'll stick with the one you pick and leave ours alone." Rothbart sighed defeat, and nodded his consent to the oath.

The visiting dignitaries and royal families were paraded before him as a prologue to the ball. Claudius, as an official magical aid to the kingdom and Rothbart's chosen advisor, was allowed to stand beside Rothbart, and was therefore on hand to whisper names into Rothbart's ear so as to help him avoid embarrassment.

"And here come the Pendragons," he informed at one point, though Rothbart had hardly needed telling at this point. The crown of Queen Guinivere's golden hair and the bejeweled broadsword swinging at King Arthur's hip was all the hint Rothbart had needed. They bowed to him, which he returned, and then the daughters were brought forth.

Rothbart kissed their fingertips in turn, as he had done for the dozen other princesses who had come through the procession ahead of these. This greeting of Guinivere II, who was at least five years Rothbart's senior, was quite routine, despite the dazzling smile she gave him when he looked up from the back of her hand. And then came Portia, the second-born. Claudius had to steady Rothbart so that he did not fall over from the shock.

She had her father's flawless, pale complexion and dark eyes, but possessed her mother's golden hair and stunning beauty. Her dress was simple and white, trimmed in a rich green-blue, as opposed to the outlandish and flamboyant styles and bold, bright colors that her sisters wore. Her physical features and an innocent air of goodness and gentility came together in such a way as to make other women seem ugly by comparison.

Rothbart almost wondered aloud how her sisters could possibly stand living in the presence of a girl who so completely overshadowed them. He barely managed to kiss Janet's hand, unable to tear his eyes away from Portia, who smiled tenatively at him. Janet, three years younger than Portia, did not react to the kiss at all, but simply looked a little bored with everything. Unlike her two sisters, she had not been formally brought out to society yet, and so wore her hair down, whereas her sister's hair was twisted into ribbon-threaded confections.

And then all five were whisked away, and a princess who had a rather unfortunate problem with acne was brought forward. "Well, make your pick," William whispered covertly from behind a pillar in the ballroom. "You can have any of them you want. I'd even go for Janet. She may be young, but she's not bad-looking." Before Rothbart could even articulate Portia's name, his father burst in on the scene, beaming.

"Well, it's obvoius, isn't it?" He questioned. "You saw the way Guinivere II looked at you. Besides, coupling youself with the first-born will put you in line to inherit that throne. She's clearly the best choice. Come, my boy, I'll introduce you." "I'd really prefer--" Rothbart began, but his father had already clamped his arm in a vicelike grip and dragged him over to the Pendragon's table with the apparent idea that he was doing Rothbart a favor.

"My son has expressed a wish to better know your eldest." He announced grandly to King Arthur when they reached the royal family of Camelot. Portia looked surprised, then slightly hurt, and resumed her consumption of the pheasant before her with a rather dejected expression. "He would wish a dance with the princess, if she would kindly consent." Guinivere II eyed Rothbart in a most inappropriate fashion, and replied in a low, smoky voice, "I'd love to."

And so Rothbart spent the night in misery, watching from within Guinivere II's talons as William politely requested a dance with Portia, who giggled coquettishly and requested her father's permission. When it was given, William whirled her onto the dance floor, which they did not leave the entire evening. Claudius spent the night with Janet, and they both seemed pleased at this lot.

It was only Queen Guinivere herself who noted Rothbart's attitude. "Ginny, darling, don't you think Prince Rothbart might be a bit tired?" she began to plead of her eldest daughter. "Perhaps you ought to favor another boy with your charm and allow him a rest." Guinivere II merely grinned in the roguish manner that Rothbart recognized from the many faces of the ladies of the court as having consumed too much wine.

"Oh, you're fine, aren't you, Barty?" She then cackled madly and frog-marched him onto the floor was the orchestra struck up Grimstock. Before the end of the night, Guinivere II had so thoroughly toasted herself that it took her father gently placing Excaliber across her throat to force her to declare herself indisposed and excuse herself from the party.

"I'm so sorry, Prince Rothbart." Queen Guinevere spoke as King Arthur lead their renegade daughter out the servant's enterance, to save face. "I don't know what came over her. She's taken to spending time with the knights, especially Sir Lancelot, and we fear that such contact may be the cause. Would you care for me to try to tear Portia away from that kind Prince William? She is very different from her sister. I trust you will find her a breath of fresh air."

Much as Rothbart would have liked to spend some time with Portia, he was forced to be honest. "I'm afraid that I could no more stand up for another dance than part with my head." he admitted sadly. "You daughter is very. . . *vigorous.* I shall have to sit out the next few songs. I thank you, however. I would very much have liked that, but I don't believe I possess the strength."

The night ended before Rothbart got the chance to dance with Portia. "You most definitely got the short end of the stick there, my friend." William beamed ecstatically as he, Rothbart, and Claudius rode back to the palace proper by carriage. "Portia is just as beautiful in demeanor as she is outwardly. You missed out on a truly phenomenal young lady." Rothbart was so rent with the pain of what might have been that he could not even find it in himself to reply to those words.

King Arthur made frequent trips, from then on, to William's kingdom, brining with him Portia and talk of merging kingdoms with the joining of royal blood. The courtship between William and Portia was too painful for Rothbart to watch, and so he wrapped himself up in his study of the Art whenever her visits coencided with his.

Portia was always extremely kind to him, and showed great appreciating and delight for the simple magic tricks Rothbart plyed her with, but that spark of what Rothbart had thought was an initial attraction was gone from her. Rothbart had only just concluded that he had been mistaken and given up completely when the relationship had truly become serious. The first clue that this had occurred came sharply when Arthur spared against William, allowing the young prince to test his strength with Excaliber.

"I think I love her," William admitted in a half-whisper as the two young men rode through the forests surrounding William's kingdom one particularly cool summer day. The sunlight shone through the leaves, lighting everything with green and causing tiny snatches of light to slide on and off of William's enraptured face. "Would it be foolish to ask for her hand in marriage if I merely *think* I love her?"

Rothbart eyed William's face for the briefest of moments. He could see the sentiment on his friend's face was genuine. "People in love are always foolish, Willy." He answered honestly. Much as he wished that it was he in William's place, he who held that enraptured expression and the love of Portia, he could not deny his friend true happiness for his own desires. "So, whether it is foolish or not makes no difference. Do what your heart tells you to do, and you will never have cause to regret anything, for nothing can be regretted if it is done from the heart."

"You are a good friend to me, Rothbart." William beamed. "And you shall be best man at my wedding for reassuring me thusly. Before, I might have been forced to have my awful cousin in that place, but I can now talk my parents into allowing you that place, seeing as it will be because of you that the wedding will happen."

Though Rothbart was sure that William and Portia would have married despite any say he had had in the matter, he kept silent, and merely smiled as best he could for William. "It will be an honor, my friend." He murmured, and William smiled back, free and pure. The wedding occurred the following month, and Portia came to live at the palace with William. The kingdoms were merged at once, and William's family reigned, as it had been Camelot from whence the future queen had come.

And then, one dismal and rainy day, years after the marriage of William and Portia, as William and Rothbart played chess in the study while Portia flipped idly through one of Rothbart's spellbooks --

It happened.

"How lovely," she commented. "A spell to change someone into a swan. Perhaps I shall have you perform it on me, Rothbart, so that I could be a swan for a day. It says that the spell will be broken through a kiss of true love and a vow of everlasting love. Seeing as I am married, William will merely need to kiss me at nightfall to break it. Do you think you could do it, dear friend?"

"I'm sure I could." Rothbart replied as he craned his neck to examine to book. "That is one of my earlier spellbooks. The spell will be simple enough. When shall I do it?" Before Portia could reply, the royal guards of William's palace burst into the room and siezed Rothbart by the arms. "What on Earth!" Portia exclaimed, pulling the spellbook to her breast.

"War, Highness." one guard declared. "Good King William had had rather enough of Prince Rothbart's magic, and when he dared to mention it to the other king, he declared war at once for such an insult. The prince is officially a prisoner of war." "Let's see how you like my magic now!" Rothbart cried, and with a gesture to empower the spell building within, bright orange light lashed out at the guards.

He leapt out the nearest window, eliciting a high-pitched, pained scream from Portia, but she need not have done so; within a few seconds, Rothbart was a great bat, floating upon the sky. "What a great animal!" The soldiers below him exclaimed. He ignored them, soaring higher and and farther from the cries of his friends. He discovered many things, through Claudius, who was still kind and loyal, from his hiding place in the forgotten castle near Swan Lake.

That his father's armies were defeated within the year, and their kingdom annexed into the territory. That, in the line of battle, King William had been killed, and Rothbart's best friend was now on the throne. That, in the confusion of his escape, a jet of magical light had hit Portia in the stomach, and it had been that, and not his strange flight, that had caused her scream. That William was now leading the search party who's sole purpose was to hunt down the man who was now not referenced unless his full title was used. That said title was 'The Evil Enchater, Rothbart.'

He spent the next ten years working on his Art, with only one thing in mind. His simple wish was to gain back the grounds that his ancestors had defended for so long. With Claudius' help, he perfected a new form of magic which was soon banned throughout the landed and earned itself the simple title of 'The Forbidden Arts.'

Rothbart failed to see why the first two branches of the Art, the Power to Change and the Power to Create, were banned, though saw perfectly eye-to-eye with William's immediate disdain on the Power to Destroy. He had simply created it in the hope of introducing something new to the battlemages in the army was was amassing, but had discovered early on the that power was too great to trust to such weak men.

He vowed never to use it, and kept it's development as secret from Claudius as he could. Though it took quite a bit of effort, he finally managed to entrap the power of the Forbidden Arts in a delicate glass orb, and kept it hidden safely in his own private bedchambers. And, he was proud to note when he neared the end of his life, he never touched the Power to Destroy.

Not a week before Rothbart's planned assault, he recieved word that Portia had given birth to a daughter, calling her 'Odette' with her final breath. Claudius then produced the spellbook which Portia had been reading that fateful day they had been parted, saying that it had been written in Portia's diary that she had always hoped to see him once again and return it.

Claudius had not seemed to understand Rothbart's howl of sorrow and disbelief at this news, but simply asked once he was mostly done weeping what they would do about the presence of a royal child. "It was never my wish to harm Willy," Rothbart told him through the tears still streaming down his face. "This child means nothing to our cause. We will proceed as planned. All I want is to get my kingdom back. They can keep the rest."

Rothbart did go to the child's christening, gasping to see how much the girl was like Portia, with only the tiniest of exceptions: her eyes were William's bright, clear blue, but Rothbart suspected that they would darken to Portia's brown with age. Rothbart ducked out of the way to allow a small, brown-haired prince to step forward and present the child with a golden locket.

Six days later, Rothbart stood before three simmering cauldrons on his study fireplace. "Tonight's the night, Bridgette." Rothbart imparted with an air of destiny to his short, haglike aid. "The night that everything I own, everything I love. . . will be mine." She just smiled reassuringly at those words, her lone yellow tooth a beautiful thing to Rothbart tonight. Everything was beautiful tonight. Everything he had ever desired, with the exception of Portia, was about to become his again. So how could the world possibly be ugly?

Rothbart turned to the cauldrons, and with a gesture caused the blue smoke rising from the central cauldron to form the shape of William holding his small daughter. He had just begun to smile at the thought of seeing William again when the smoke blossomed scarlet and broke into the form of a dragon. Before Rothbart even had the chance to wonder what such an omnious picture foretold, his question was answered.

Soldiers in William's colors burst into the room, crashing tables and destroying experimental phials of potions. Rothbart backed into a corner, pushing Bridgette behind him to protect her. "It's no use, Enchanter." One soldier laughed coldly as he produced the glass orb. Before Rothbart's terrified eyes, the thing was thrown to the floor and shattered at his feet.

He attempted other spells, which did not strictly relate to the Forbidden Arts, but found to his horror that it was not only the power of the Forbidden Arts that had been tied to the orb, but also his own innate ability. Broken and helpless, he could do nothing but beg that Bridgette and Claudius be spared. Though he had no idea why at first, the soldiers granted his request. He had only just sighed with relief when the same soldier who had smashed the orb added, "We always grant a prisoner's last request."

A sickeningly brawny man stepped forward, carrying an axe. Rothbart attempted to struggle free, but a life of endearment to magical defense and left him as thin and physically useless as he'd been the day he'd summoned the dragon. He was thrown across a tree stump in his own courtyard, and the axe was raised above his head. "*Stop.*" a voice ordered. Rothbart looked up to see William standing in an archway, his face set and stern.

William had aged relatively gracefully, and though his hair had greyed almost completely from it's original brown, at least he still had all of it, which could not be said for Rothbart. "Willy--!" He exclaimed, but then William turned that hateful gaze on him. "I am King William III, and you will call me such, prisoner." He spoke harshly. "It was because of you that Portia and I could not have children until now. It was because of the wound you inflicted that her pregnancy was difficult. And it was because of that same wound that she died after giving birth."

"Willy, I never meant to--" Rothbart began, but William did not seem to hear him. "This man is to be banished, not killed. Such is my will. You may either follow my wishes, *Captain,* or kill him for your own pleasure, *Prisoner.* The choice it yours." The titles William spoke were not lost on the captain, who immediately began snapping orders that Rothbart be chained up.

"Willy! Listen to me!" Rothbart howled imploringly as he was loaded into a carriage. William simply mounted his dapple and rode to the front of the guard that would be escorting Rothbart to the border. Boiling with rage at William's betrayal and unrightous anger, Rothbart stewed within the carriage until he finally drifted into a fitful sleep.

When he awoke, it was still nighttime outside his window, and therefore inmpossible to tell whether it was the same night or the next. But one thing did catch his eye. William had fallen back, and was staring with an expression of mingled longing and hatred and Rothbart's dark window. "Willy!" Rothbart called from within, poking his head out the window hopefully. William's flabberghasteds expression was all the opening he needed.

"Willy, I know what you think, and none of it's true!" He cried. "I never meant to hurt Portia! It was an accident! I wept when I heard that she had died -- you can ask any of my aids, they'll tell you so!" William's face had become blank, and in the darkness it was impossible to tell if he was listening because he believed Rothbart or because he wanted to see how long the madman he had once called 'friend' would ramble.

"I. . . I loved her, too." Rothbart admitted quietly. "Not as much as you, I'm sure, because I never knew her love in return. But, I always did, from the first moment I laid eyes on her. And I knew that you loved each other, friend, so I stepped aside and allowed you your happiness. I would never have hurt her. I was just trying to escape. I'm sorry if I did. You can't possibly imagine how I felt, knowing that it was most likely my fault that she died. But know, Willy, that I share your sorrow."

William's face burst with rage at those words, like Castle Mountain had nearly a century ago. "You know my pain?" William demanded. "You know how it felt to long for a child, and be unable to have one because of the man you had always considered a brother? You know how it felt to watch my wife when she was finally with child, breaking out into cold sweats and paler than the moon and in pain nearly every moment? You know how it felt to hear Portia's screaming stop at the same moment our daughter's began? You know nothing."

William reined his horse closer to the carriage so as to allow Rothbart a better view of his face. "During her last months, Portia expressed several wishes that you be granted clemency when we finally caught you." William seethed. "And I have granted her wish. But don't you ever, ever think that I did what I did out of love for you. I know you were plotting to steal my kingdom, out of spite for my father's insult. I had no hand in that, Rothbart! Why would you attack me?" At the last, a note of the boys the two had once been rang in William's voice, hurt and afraid.

"You thought I wanted the whole kingdom?" Rothbart cried. "Never! I only wanted what was mine, Willy, what your father took from mine! I wasn't planning my attack out of spite! I just wanted my home!" William caught his eyes and held them for many moments, not moving even as the carriage jolted or his horse sidled down the rode. "Liar," he eventually pronounced, and charged to the front of the procession once more.

Rothbart was released at the edge of the kingdom the next day, and neither of the men had seen the other's side of things yet. "I'm not finished with you yet, Willy!" he cried, throwing off the chains he'd been bound with. "Someday, I'll get my power back! And, when I do, everything *you* own -- everything *you* love! -- will be mine!" William simply pointed a stern finger down the road leading to the neighboring kingdom. Rothbart turned his back and stormed down the dirt path, his cape rippling behind him.

It had hardly been a few miles when a blonde-haired woman in an unattractive, narrow black dress emerged from the shrubbery. Her nose was hooked and hawklike, her make-up drastically overdone. Despite her appauling appearance, she smiled at Rothbart. "You don't remember me, do you?" She inquired. When Rothbart made no reply, she laughed, and told him, "It's me, Rothbart! Zelda! Don't you remember me from the old days? I used to have quite a crush on Prince William -- well, King William, now."

"What is it you want from me?" Rothbart demanded, still boiling with anger and eager to take it out on something. "Ooh, we're not in a very good mood, are we?" Zelda cooed. "Well, I just thought you might like to know that I had these -- Bridgette! --" Bridgette emerged from the nearby bushes, and withdrew some yellow parchment covered in hard, runic black writing from the folds of her dress, which she handed to Zelda "-- and that I've got plenty of space for magic practice."

"Master Claudius wanted papers very bad." Bridgette informed in her half-language. "Bridgette saved them. Master Claudius says Rothbart betrayed him. But Bridgette doesn't know what Master Claudius means, but she doesn't care. She wants to help Master Rothbart. So she brings papers here, nice and safe, to nice lady who says she has plan."

"My notes!" Rothbart screamed, lunging to snatch them from her grasp. "No, not yet." Zelda denied, dancing on the spot and whirling out of his way. "You're only getting these back on one condition." "Anything!" Rothbart gasped. With an expression like the girl she had been in days long ago, Zelda said, "When you've taken back your kingdom, I only want one thing. . . to be your queen." The desire in her voice was unmistakeable.

Rothbart considered for a moment. She was not as unattractive as he had originally thought. A flattering dress and natural make-up could easily make her more lovely. Besides, there were worse things than an arranged marriage. "Anything you say, my queen." he agreed silkenly, sweeping into a low bow and kissing her fingertips lightly.

It was eighteen years before Rothbart's attempts to regain his magic came to fruition. During that time, Zelda became power-hungry, desiring the entire land, instead of that which rightfully belonged to Rothbart. He'd been forced to leave her, listening as he left to her insane shouts about his wanting the young Odette to be queen in her stead. He had always thought Zelda was a little crazy, and this proved it, for he had hardly mentioned Odette more than half a dozen times in all their years together.

Another occurrance during those long years was the plotting of William and the widowed Queen Uberta, sovreign of the kingdom upon whom's border Rothbart had been released. They continued to send their children to visit each other over the summer. Uberta had a son, Derek, and it was the dearest wish of the two monarchs that their children should wed and join their kingdoms. But the children, Rothbart heard, despised one another.

It was, in fact, on the very night that Odette and William rode back to their kingdom from one of these visits that Rothbart chose to strike. "Today's the day, Willy," He muttered to himself as the jingling of bridles became audible. "The day that everything you own. . . everything you love. . . will be mine."

The captain spotted him first, bringing the horses to a stop. After a brief moment, William appeared from within the carriage. Rothbart saw that he had hardly aged at all, though his hair was slightly more grey, and his face a bit more care-worn. In a flash of orange light, Rothbart was the same, enormous, batlike creature he'd been on his escape from the castle guards uner King William II's command.

His only wish was to scare away the guards, for they had certainly been terrified the last time they'd seen this creature. But they attacked. Rothbart hewed their bodies left and right, regretting each drop of blood spilled, but unwilling, even after all these years, to give up his dream. His homeland was worth any price. Turning about to hack into another combatant, Rothbart gasped and attempted to crawfish backward, but it was too late.

William's eyes grew wide, his mouth gaping and silent, his fingers lax about his broadsword. "No!" Rothbart screamed, transforming even as his claws rent into William's stomach. There was another scream, this one feminine, and Rothbart looked up just in time to see a mane of long, golden-blonde hair disappearing around the bend. Princess Odette, now defenseless, had chosen to run.

"Willy -- I'm so sorry -- please forgive --" William began to sink to his knees, and Rothbart caught him, easing him to the ground as rain began to fall. "William, don't worry, you'll be okay." Rothbart assured, his fingers working and the buttons of William's waistcoat to get to the wound. "I can fix you. I --" William grasped his hands, catching Rothbart's gaze. "O. . Odette. . ." "She'll be okay, Willy, there are no wolves in the area right now. I'll take care of her in a minute." Rothbart informed quickly, struggling to free his hands.

William grasped them still more tightly, and raised one hand to his friend's face. This immobilized Rothbart long enough for William to speak again. "Rothbart. . . I know you never had the Power to Heal." He spoke softly. "I am going to die. I know you didn't mean it. I shouldn't have attacked to begin with, I suppose. But Odette must be kept safe. I love her more than the life I'm losing at this very moment. Friend, make me one last vow: promise to take care of Odette."

"You're delusional," Rothbart denied, fighting William's grasp harder. "I have the Power to Change. It's the same thing. Just let me help, and soon --" "Promise me!" William begged, his eyes growing wide as a puddle of his own blood began to form under the pair. "Rothbart, my captain escaped, I saw him! He's gone to get Prince Derek! We don't have much time! Promise me that she'll be taken care of, brother!"

The final word cut through Rothbart like a knife. William's gaze, so helpless and pleading, melted his heart. "Yes, of course, my brother." He replied gently. "I would have seen to her well-being even if you hadn't made me swear. Now, let me fix this, and we can go home together--" "Make me another vow, friend, before anything else happens." William pleaded, a bit more desperate now. "This one might be more important, I think, to Odette in particular."

"Anything, Willy." Rothbart whispered. William took a deep breath, and coughed, before going on. "Prince Derek asked for Odette's hand today." He informed. "That's wonderful news!" Rothbart cried ecstatically. "Shall I be permitted to go to the wedding, or will it occur before arrangements can be made for me to do so?"

"There won't be a wedding," William sighed. "She denied him. She asked him if beauty was all that mattered to him, and he asked her what else there was. She loves him deeply, but she wants to know that he loves her for her soul and mind, not her beauty. I know that he does love her, but he is an extremely inarticulate boy, rather slow at times. Friend, if you can, help him to show it."

"I will," Rothbart agreed solemnly, now rather concerned over William's blood loss. "Now, if you will allow me to --" But there was a cry in the distance, and the sound of horse's hooves splashing in the rain. "That's him now, Rothbart." William informed. "You must go now, and find her." "Not until you've made me a vow as well." Rothbart told him stubbornly. "Please, Willy. . . just tell me that you believe me. Tell me that you know I never meant to hurt Portia, and that I only ever wanted my kingdom back. Can you tell me that, honestly, friend?"

Rothbart and William stared at each other for what seemed an eternity. William's eyes seemed seraching, as though the expression on Rothbart's face was the map to a fabulous treasure. Eventually, he smiled softly, and replied, "Yes, brother. I know now that you are innocent. I'm sorry that I hurt you so with my disbelief. I was hurt, too, and so I suppose I didn't want to see it. This is partially my fault, too."

"None of that matters anymore." Rothbart beamed down at him. "Thank you, Willy. I'll do my best to keep my word to you." And he then made a gesture, said a word of power, and William cautiously ran his hands over the still-seeping wound. "What--" he began. "I don't want you to die in pain," Rothbart explained. "I'll put on a good show for the prince if you will. Goodbye. . . my friend." "Goodbye, my brother." William returned.

Tears streamed down Rothbart's face as he took to the sky once more. Below him, he heard someone scream Odette's name. He found the girl weeping by a nearby waterfall, and fell right out of the sky when he caught a glimpse of her face. She might have been Portia brought back to life had her eyes not remained the same blue since the last time he'd seen her. After a moment of composure in the trees, Rothbart returned to the form of a man, and emerged.

"Princess?" He beckoned softly. She recoiled with horror, falling against a nearby clump of orchids. "Who -- who are you?" She questioned. "I am Prince Rothbart." he informed her. Though his throne was long since defunct, he still could not bring himself to drop the title. "I vowed to your father that I would protect you. Come with me." He held out his hand, smiling as kindly as he could. Tremblingly, Odette took it, and shrieked with fright as he transported them, in a flash of orange light, to Swan Lake.

"Rothbart, the Evil Enchanter!" she screamed as her feet plunged into the water, but already Rothbart was reciting the spell, standing firm on a magical platform which was invisible to even himself. She had almost made it to the shore, encumbered as she was by her gown and traveling cloak, when an undertow lit with gold and purple light sucked her under. Rothbart continued the spell, trusting that this was what was supposed to happen.

Her cloak floated to the surface, a bubble of blood on the mirrorlike blue surface, and a pair of alligators instantly began the work of tearing it to shreds. Rothbart drove them away, working a protective charm to the spell of binding he'd begun to weave into words. It was all he could do for the time being. He just needed to keep her in one place until he could decide what to do with her.

She surfaced, sputtering, and Rothbart hid behind a clump of bushes. She barely managed to crawl ashore before collapsing into tears and, eventually, sleep. A turtle crawled forward tentatively, with a frog perched surreptisiously on his shell. Rothbart smiled at this, and cast another spell, this one over the animals as well as Odette. When she awoke, she would have company.

And so Rothbart paced in his castle the entire night, thinking long and hard. What to do? How to do it? Bridgette brought him a sandwich, which he consumed without really tasting it. It was only as the moon began to set, and a brilliant flash of gold light signaled that the spell had worked as planned, that it occurred to him.

"I made her a swan!" he cried, almost hysterically. "Just like her mother wanted for herself!" Bridgette smiled hopefully, though it was clear that she didn't understand his train of thought yet. "The spell requires a kiss of true love and a vow of love everlasting to be broken! That's it, Bridgette, that's how I'll keep my word! I'll make the prince fight for her! Then Odette will know his love is true, and they'll be all the closer for having worked to be together! It's brilliant, Bridgette, brilliant!"

And so, every night for several months, he went down to the lake, harrassing Odette so that she would wish fervently to be away from him. And yet he recieved word that the boy was merely practicing combat and rifling through every book in the library, muttering to himself, "'It's not what it seems'. . . what did King William mean?" Though hearing that those had been William's last words brought Rothbart to the verge of joyous tears, it still agitated him that the boy wasn't trying hard enough.

It took another month of pacing and plotting before it occurred to him to twist William's words so that they referranced Rothbart's ability to change his shape. One night, he snuck into the library through a window and planted one of his own spellbooks on the shelves just a few rows down from the borderline where books lay strewn everywhere. Tomorrow, Derek would find the book he didn't know he'd been looking for.

Rothbart slept in the next day, and awoke to Bridgette proudly announcing that Odette, the turtle, the frog, and a puffin had seiged the castle and stolen a map to Derek's kingdom. "I fought like I was truly wanting map-map." She informed. "They almost didn'tses get away. Gators nearly ate them. But Bridgette did magic she learn from Master Rothbart, and save them." "You did very well, Bridgette." Rothbart told her, and she smiled gleefully.

He watched out his window all day. Odette and the puffin Bridgette had spoken of set off to the North, and were gone until the tiniest sliver of a moon rose in the sky. They headed for a cliffside overlooking the lake, where what seemed to be a pair of abnormally large red fireflies hailed them. When they touched down, the fireflies seemed to break, tiny red pinpoints spreading in every direction.

Derek appeared near the lake, and Odette seemed to hesitate for a moment before taking flight and landing in the very center of the moon's reflection on the lake. Just then, a cloud drifted before the moon, preventing her transformation. To Rothbart's horror, Derek drew his bow and nocked an arrow. "*No!*" He screamed, pelting out of his room and down the stairs without even thinking to transform and fly down the stairs.

By the time he reached to woods, calling Odette's name, Derek would have already killed her. But, when he reached the clearing, he held back. Derek's bow was on the ground at his feet, and the pair were standing in the shallows of the lake. Odette's hands here on Derek's shoulders, and she was explaining the spell she was under. Derek told her to come to the ball his mother was holding that night, and that he would make the vow then.

Rothbart could only assumed that she had already kissed him, but was surprised that she kept telling him to leave, that yes, she would come, and would he now please go? It occurred to him that, no matter the struggle they'd gone through to meet this once, the boy was still hopelessly thick. Something more would have to be done before he was worthy.

Derek placed a golden locket in Odette's palm, and left, as she'd begged him to do nearly a dozen times now. And then it struck him. "Odette! Why didn't you come when I called you?" He demanded when Derek had disappeared, bursting from the shrubbery. "I -- um --" Odette stammered. She then broke into some ridiculous tale about wishing to marry him, as he had been pestering her to do in the hopes of repelling her further.

Rothbart put on his best show of delight, and then produced Derek's bow and questioned if she knew where it had come from. "I will never be yours, you. . . creature!" Odette declared fiercely as he cast the bow into the lake. "I will marry Prince Derek, and you will *cannot* stop me!" "Oh, I hate to break it to you, Odette," Rothbart told her with as much malice as he could muster as he peeled her hand open and retrieved the locket. "But you won't be able to attend the grand ball tomorrow night."

"If you want to stop me," she hissed, her expression one of bottomless loathing. "You'll have to kill me." "No, I don't think so," Rothbart told her as he slipped the trinket into his pocket. "You see, you've forgotten one very important thing. Tomorrow night. . . there is no moon." Odette's face crumpled with tears as the fact overwhelmed her, and Rothbart put on his best evil laugh as he strode away. That night, the perfect plan of action formed in Rothbart's mind, and he slept peacefully for the first time in years.

The next day, he placed Odette in a flooded dungeon from which he trusted her friends would be able to rescue her, seeing as it was directly connected to Swan Lake and had a number of large holes in the sides. While walking back up to the castle porper, he came across a blubbering young man in the forest. He was fat and rather useless with the bow he'd brought with him. Rothbart pushed him in the dungeon with Odette, shouted a few harsh words to stir the anger in her heart, and set to work with the spell he'd prepared.

Within moments, Bridgette was willowy and blonde, dressed to kill and wearing the locket Rothbart had taken from Odette. "Okay, then, let's go." Rothbart smiled at his reflection as he clasped the pin of his cloak. "Right," Bridgette agreed in a softy, honey-like voice. They traveled by carriage, Rothbart charging the horses at every chance. They barely arrived in time, and Rothbart almost wished they had flown until it occurred to him that Bridgette's hair would have been in ruins had they done so.

"You know what to do," Rothbart encouraged as she raised a dainty fist to knock on the great golden doors, and disappeared into the rosebushes. She had to knock three times before a hopeful-looking chamberlain opened the door and assumed an expression of shock. "Well, it's not the milk-man," he murmured defeatedly as Bridgette descended the double staircase and glided straight to Derek.

They danced, and Rothbart noticed a swan pecking at all the windows just as Derek called to stop the music. It was almost time. Derek made a vow of everlasting love, "To Odette," Rothbart noted. He was glad that the boy had worded it that way, or he would have had to perform extensive magic to preserve Odette's life. Instead, she was now simply going to slip into a coma until the vow was corrected.

She squawked her disbelief and darted back to Swan Lake as Rothbart stormed into the ballroom. Derek was quite convinced that he had broken the spell, until Rothbart sent a jet of light flying at Bridgette, who turned back into herself and cackled at Derek when he realized what had happened.

Derek was on his horse and headed for Swan Lake in a grand total of thirty seconds. Rothbart was surprised how fast he'd done everything, but noticed sadly that Derek had not bothered to find a real sword before setting out, and his decorative claymore still swung at his side as Rothbart flew covertly overhead, shouting taunts at the boy to enrage him and drive him on.

Derek reached the lake just in time to see the spell break. Odette was a woman again when he took her in his arms and begged her to survive. "The vow I made was for you," He wept. Odette caressed his face sadly. "I know," she whispered in a voice so weak and broken that Rothbart was half-tempted to burst from concealment and explain everything just to end the pitiful moment.

But he didn't. Odette fainted in Derek's arms, and Derek screamed to the sky that the vow he'd made was for Odette. "No need to shout," Rothbart chided as he emerged, and Derek charged him, gripping the front of his shirt. "Don't let her die!" he cried simply. "Is that a threat?" Rothbart used his most casual tone, thinking to incense the boy. It worked. "Don't you dare let her die!" Derek repeated.

"Oh, it *is* a threat." Rothbart acknowledged, as though discussing the weather, and Threw Derek off. "You're the only one with the power!" The prince pronounced, his face alight with rage and purpose. "Now *do* it!" "*Only* if you defeat. . ." Rothbart paused, for the dramatic effect, which he knew the prince would recall in later years. There was reason not to do the job well. ". . . *Me.*"

The orange light swirled around him, and he was once more the great bat. "The Great Animal!" Derek exclaimed the title he'd read in the book Rothbart had planted, his voice a whisper from the shock. His face was blank and stunned, so Rothbart roared to snap him out of it. Derek attacked boldly after that, but his ornamental claymore was nothing against a good snap of Rothbart's jaws. He broke the sword not because he wished to defeat the boy, but to teach him a lesson. The next time he rode into battle, perhaps, he would be better armed.

He dodged the dirt Derek threw at his eyes, but hissed convincingly as though he had not, only to miss the rock Derek bashed at him with. Rothbart pulled him into the air, through the trees, where the boy fought free and toon a tough landing in a leaveless oak. Rothbart held off for a moment to allow the boy to regain his composure before attacking again. It could not be denied: the boy was fighting bravely.

When Derek hit the ground again, Rothbart was shocked to see as he approached that the bow was somehow, miraculously, laying no the ground beside him. Derek instinctively reached for the quiver of arrows that was not there as Rothbart drew closer, only to assume a panicked expression when he discovered that fact.

"Oh, please, oh, please, oh, please, oh, please. . ." a voice rose above the rush of the air in Rothbart's ears. The fat prisoner had espaced, and shot an arrow and Derek, who caught it as though he had been practicing rounds of Catch-and-Fire. Rothbart had only just begun to pull back whe Derek nocked the arrow and released it. It caught him directly in the chest. Screaming, he plummeted down to the lake, making contact in an explosion of orange and purple light.

Even as he went under, he felt something strange happening. The arrow worked itself painlessly from his body and, slowly, the wound began to close. Rothbart felt himself being pulled, faster than he ever could have swam, toward the castle, and was pulled through a large hole in the wall of the flooded dungeon. He surfaced with a gasp, clutching a metal ring on the wall as the fat prisoner had done.

"Master Rothbart safe now," Bridgette announded as she flung a rope ladder down to him. "Thank you, Bridgette," Rothbart said when he reached the top. He assumed the shape of the bat one final time, and flew to the clearing where Odette's body was. He'd just finished the incantation when Derek approached.

"Odette. . . I'm so sorry." Derek whimpered as he cradled her body close. There was something inexplicably different in his voice. He sounded more mature, almost. He was no longer a thick, weakling boy of a prince. His love and determination had made him a man. Rothbart listened as Derek spoke softly to her the all tender thing he ought to have said when she uttered those fateful words: "Is beauty all that matters to you?"

"I love you. . . your kindness and courage. . . and I always have." He kissed her forehead sweetly, and had just begun to weep again when she stirred. "Derek?" she questioned. Derek sputtered, gasping. "Odette!" he cried. "Oh, Derek!" Odette exclaimed, realizing that he had fought, had won, and had at last realized that which he ought to have years ago.

They were married within the week, and though nobody saw it, one wedding guest smiled as they walked past him on the street. He murmured a spell, and felt a strange sensation from just behind his ribs that he was tied to the Princess Odette by an invisible string. Bridgette caught his eye from her place behind Odette, carrying her veil. They exchanged the briefest of nods, and the guest turned and entered the local pub, which was already jammed with commonfolk celebrators. He ordered a pint, and sat in an abandoned table in the corner.

"To everlasting love." the man spoke as he raised his pint in a private toast. "To vows that go beyond death. To friendship and brotherhood. To the late Queen Portia. But, most of all, to you, Willy." He downed the pint, and left the pub, his hood pulled up over his head to his his face. As he left the town, he walked past the fat prisoner, talking to a comically skinny man with a large, crooked nose.

The man pointed at the approaching Queen Uberta, whose famous hair was done up to look like a swan. The shadow she cast frightened the fat prisoner, who fainted on the spot. The skinny man and Queen Uberta linked arms laughingly and followed the procession. Rothbart laughed as well, and kept walking. He knew now that he would never get his kingdom back, but the pain of that loss seemed somehow distant with the contentment of knowing what his actions had brought about.

One year later, through the link he'd established to determine if Odette was ever in danger, Rothbart felt as well as heard the news from villagers that his old friend, Claudius, had kidnapped Queen Uberta and nearly killed both Derek and Odette in the resulting battle to free the queen. it seemed that he had found the second orb Rothbart had made when re-creating his powers with Zelda, and had used it for his own purposes.

The second orb had also been smashed, but Rothbart had been careful to exclude his own powers from things this time. The breaking of the orb did, however, cause Castle Mountain to erupt once more, killing Claudius. Despite their years of friendship, Rothbart could not find it in himself to weep over the loss of what Claudius had become.

Less than a week after that, Rothbart woke in a cold sweat, the invisible string tugging at him madly. It was direct trouble this time -- something had happened to Odette. Closing his eyes and concentrating, he saw Zelda chanting incantations from parchment covered in hard runic symbols as Odette watched, tied to a stalagmite and struggling to free herself. It was all the information he needed.

Taking the shape of a bat once more, Rothbart took to the skies and flew more quickly than he'd ever done to reach her. The trip took all of the day and wore on into the next evening. Just as a mountain range came into sight, Rothbart felt the string give a mundane little tweak after it's nonstop thrashing, and went still. Rothbart could still feel the connection, but it was growing weaker by the second.

He began to panic until he saw the puffin flying from a dark, evil-looking forest back to the range. Rothbart plummeted to the spot the puffin had left to find a regal-looking white swan caught in some vines, engulfed in red light that resembled fire and fading fast. In a moment, she would be gone. It was the quickest and most desperate spellwork Rothbart had ever done to save her. His final spell changed her back into a woman, and he personally flew her to the range.

She woke up about halfway through, but seemed to think she was dreaming, and so did not scream or otherwise react, aside from a simple question. "Where are we going?" She asked. Rothbart heard Derek scream with disbelief. The puffin must have told him that Odette was dead. "To the prince," he replied. When they landed, Odette made to enter and find her husband, but Rothbart caught her arm.

"Not yet." he ordered, and she obeyed qualmlessly. He almost changed into a man without warning, but hesitated, and added, 'I'm about to do something that may scare you. Please don't scream." She nodded, and her only reaction was to gasp when he turned back into himself. "How--?" She began. "No time," Rothbart interrupted. "I'm about to transport you in there. Don't tell him about me. Go on with your life. Just remember that your father loved you."

Before she could question him, Rothbart heard Derek murmuring something about burning his notes. It seemed as good an opening as anything. A word of power, a gesture to give it meaning, and Odette was gone. She would have re-appeared in a flash of smoke which would have taken the shape of a swan, but Rothbart never saw it, as he had taken to the sky again.

He only ever checked on her one other time in her life, two years after saving her from Zelda, when he felt the joint pull of two strings instead of one. He arrived just in time to hear three simultaneous noises: the infant squalled and Odette and Derek both laughed with joy as the child was placed in her arms. "I want to call him 'William Rothbart.'" Odette spoke once the midwife left. Rothbart smiled, and adjusted his uneasy perch outside her window.

"After the enchanter?" Derek questioned, incredulous. "What for?" "Because my father loved me," Odette replied softly, her voice thick with nostalgia. "I think he loved us both." "I'm sure he did love us," Derek replied, not realizing that she had not been talking about him. "And we'll call him whatever you want. He looks so much like your father, after all. He even has is eyes."

"Bring William to the window," she ordered. "Hold him out in the light. I want to get a good look at him." Rothbart wasn't sure if she knew he was there, or if she truly did just want a better view of the child, or if she simply hoped that her father's spirit was looking down from Heaven to see his grandchild. Either way, Rothbart's smile widened at the sight of the baby boy.

He did indeed had his grandfather's eyes, his mother's eyes. But he had the strangest hair. . . "It looks almost red, doesn't it?" Odette questioned. "His hair?" Derek inquired. "Yes, it does. How odd." But it didn't seem odd to little William, who looked directly up and Rothbart and smiled. Rothbart thought he saw a hint of orange light sparkle at the baby's fingertips.

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